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# Memories of Life on the Farm: Through the Lens of Pioneer Photographer J. C. Allen

Frederick Whitford

Neal Harmeyer

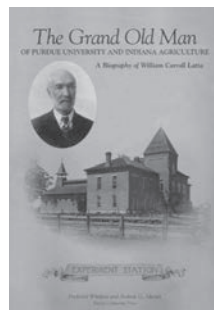
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*Memories*  
OF LIFE ON  
THE FARM

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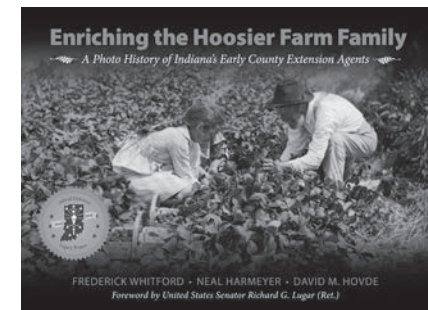
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*Memories*  
OF LIFE ON  
THE FARM

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THROUGH THE  
LENS OF PIONEER  
PHOTOGRAPHER  
*J. C. Allen*

**FREDERICK WHITFORD • NEAL HARMeyer**

PURDUE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Unless otherwise noted, all photographs in this book are from the J. C. Allen and Son Inc. Photographs and Negatives Collection at the Purdue University Archives and Special Collections, West Lafayette, Indiana. While photographs from this collection included in this book are presented as John C. Allen's work, it is possible that a few of the images may have been the work of his son, Chester Allen.

For all photographs, information about individuals, organizations, places, events, and dates has been provided to the extent it is known. The abbreviation *n.p.* indicates that no place is known, while *n.d.* indicates that no date is known.

All places mentioned are in Indiana unless otherwise noted.

As needed, some minor grammatical changes were made to improve the readability of quoted material; these changes did not affect content.

*Photo of John C. Allen on opposite page: Tippecanoe County, 1930; courtesy John O. Allen*

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*To be most successful in this work, I think one should be a perfectionist and satisfied with nothing less than the best he can do. My work has not all been easy, but it has been pleasant much of the time.*

—JOHN CALVIN ALLEN





These Llewelin setter puppies appeared in an advertisement for Wayne Dog Food. (N.p., ca. 1933)

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Women work in a foundry for the Harrison Manufacturing Company. (Fountain County, 1944)

## FOREWORD

The farm magazine that attracted me the most growing up on a small dairy farm in Johnson County, Indiana, in the 1960s was *Prairie Farmer*. It certainly wasn't because I had a premonition that I would someday write for that magazine. Instead, I was 100 percent farm boy, and the big, front-page pictures of a farmer plowing or cows in a pasture always said "Indiana agriculture" to me.

Once I began writing for the magazine as a field editor in 1981—working alongside Tom Budd, the editor, and Carl "Indiana Ike" Eiche—I learned that many of those photos I liked so much were taken by a freelance photographer and later by his son. *Prairie Farmer* and, eventually, *Indiana Prairie Farmer* purchased many photos from J. C. Allen and Son for magazine covers during the mid- and latter part of the twentieth century.

Little did I know that Allen was a legend in his own right. After I had the chance to view hundreds of his photos, going back into the days of black-and-white photography, I understood why. Based in West Lafayette, Indiana, he traveled farm country with his camera equipment, taking photos of real farm people and real



The *Indiana Prairie Farmer* broadcasting truck on location at the Indiana State Fair on September 6, 1935. (Marion County)

farm scenes. He captured everything from a young boy driving a very early tractor to farmers plowing, disking, combining, and working on equipment.

Many years ago, I served on a judging committee for the American Agricultural Editors' Association charged with picking out the best photos submitted by agricultural photographers that year. I soon learned that what I considered good photos and what many others caught up in modern journalism thought were good photos were quite different. They were into artsy-type photos. I was looking for genuine photos that tell a

story, such as a herd of cows standing under a tree on a hot day or a farmer cultivating corn with an old Massey-Harris 44 tractor and two-row mounted cultivator with a young boy along for the ride.

J. C. Allen and Son captured hundreds of images that were award winning in my book. Taken together as a body of work over decades, they paint the story of U.S. agriculture during a large part of the twentieth century—a story that includes the people who sweated and worked hard to grow crops and raise livestock, and the technological changes they encountered along the way.

My hat is off to the authors who spent time reviewing hundreds of photos and piecing together another story: that of an unsung hero of American agriculture, John C. Allen. He preserved this history in photos as it unfolded before him. Now the authors have preserved it for you. Enjoy every page!

Tom J. Bechman  
Editor, *Indiana Prairie Farmer*







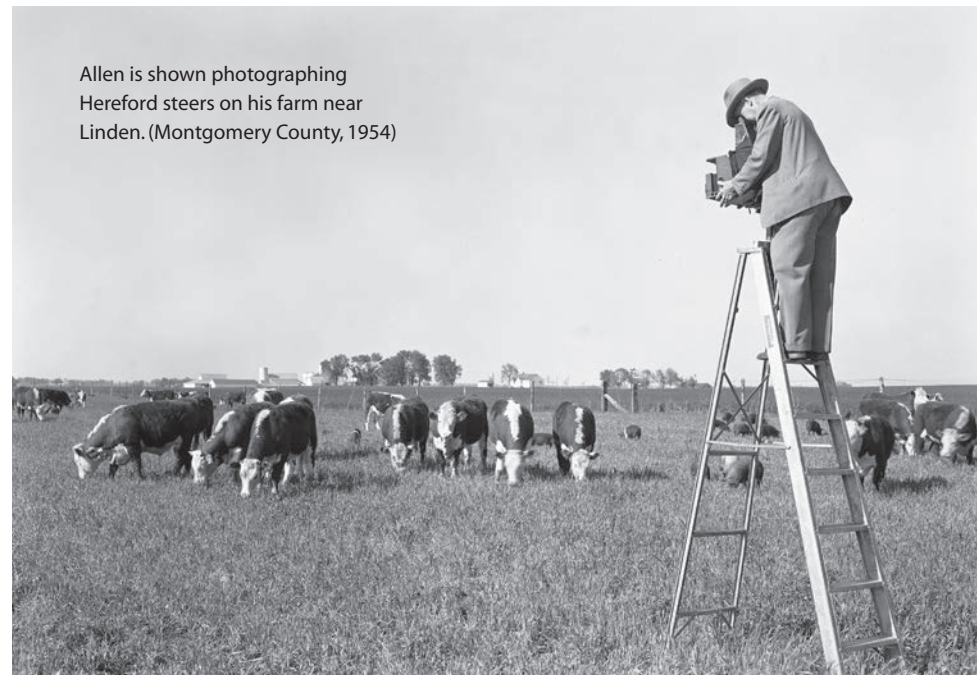
This picture of Chester Allen at approximately four years old holding two pigs was one of John Allen's favorites. (N.p., ca. 1911; courtesy John O. Allen)

# Introduction

Who among us has not spent hours studying photographs of family and friends or old sections of our town and countryside? Images transport us to another time, another place, another state of being. Photographs of young children playing in the yard, cradling yellow chicks, or starting school stir something deep within us.

Photographs capture events, memories, and even emotions, connecting us to those times, places, and moments. When the spoken or written word is unable to convey depth or significance, a photograph speaks. Photographs evoke wonderment, happiness, inspiration, pain, nostalgia, and loss—facets of the human sense and desire for links to our collective memory.

Images provide the tool to look into the eyes of people long gone and places long abandoned. The photographer documents an exact moment, fixing the person, place, or event within his or her scope. Indeed, though the photographer is not visible in the image, that person is a participant. The photographer perceives the scene and then defines it through the lens. The camera acts as a documentary instrument, with the resulting image serving as a proxy to the camera lens, binding the view of all who reminisce or study over a



Allen is shown photographing Hereford steers on his farm near Linden. (Montgomery County, 1954)

photograph to a fixed perspective. The photographer is a creator, and the photograph, a creation that is redefined with each new viewer.

John Calvin Allen, an amateur-turned-professional photographer, captured a rich collection of photographs depicting life during much of the twentieth century in Indiana—on the farm, in the cities, and at Purdue University—through his work. As a self-taught but highly successful photographer, his more than 100,000 images span all facets of Hoosier life. However, Allen consistently focused his lens upon farms and rural

communities, resulting in a rare glimpse of agriculture and rural life at that time.

The J. C. Allen photographs represent a historical account of the transition from pioneer practices to scientific methodologies in agriculture and rural communities from 1909 until the early 1970s. During this major transitional period for agriculture, tractors replaced horses, hybrid corn supplanted open-pollinated corn, and soybeans changed from a novelty crop to one placed in regular rotation on most farms. It was also a time when purebred animals with better genetic pedigrees replaced run-of-the-mill livestock, and livestock producers adopted practices to promote systematic disease

prevention in cattle, swine, and poultry. Looking closely at the tractors, livestock, wagons, planters, sprayers, harvesting equipment, and crops Allen photographed gives us a sense of the changing and fast-paced world of agriculture, captured then but experienced now.

But the reach of the J. C. Allen collection goes well beyond men working in fields, animals grazing on green and lush pastures, and participants who excelled at competitions such as the International Live Stock Exposition in Chicago or the Indiana State Fair in Indianapolis. Allen's photographs document clothing

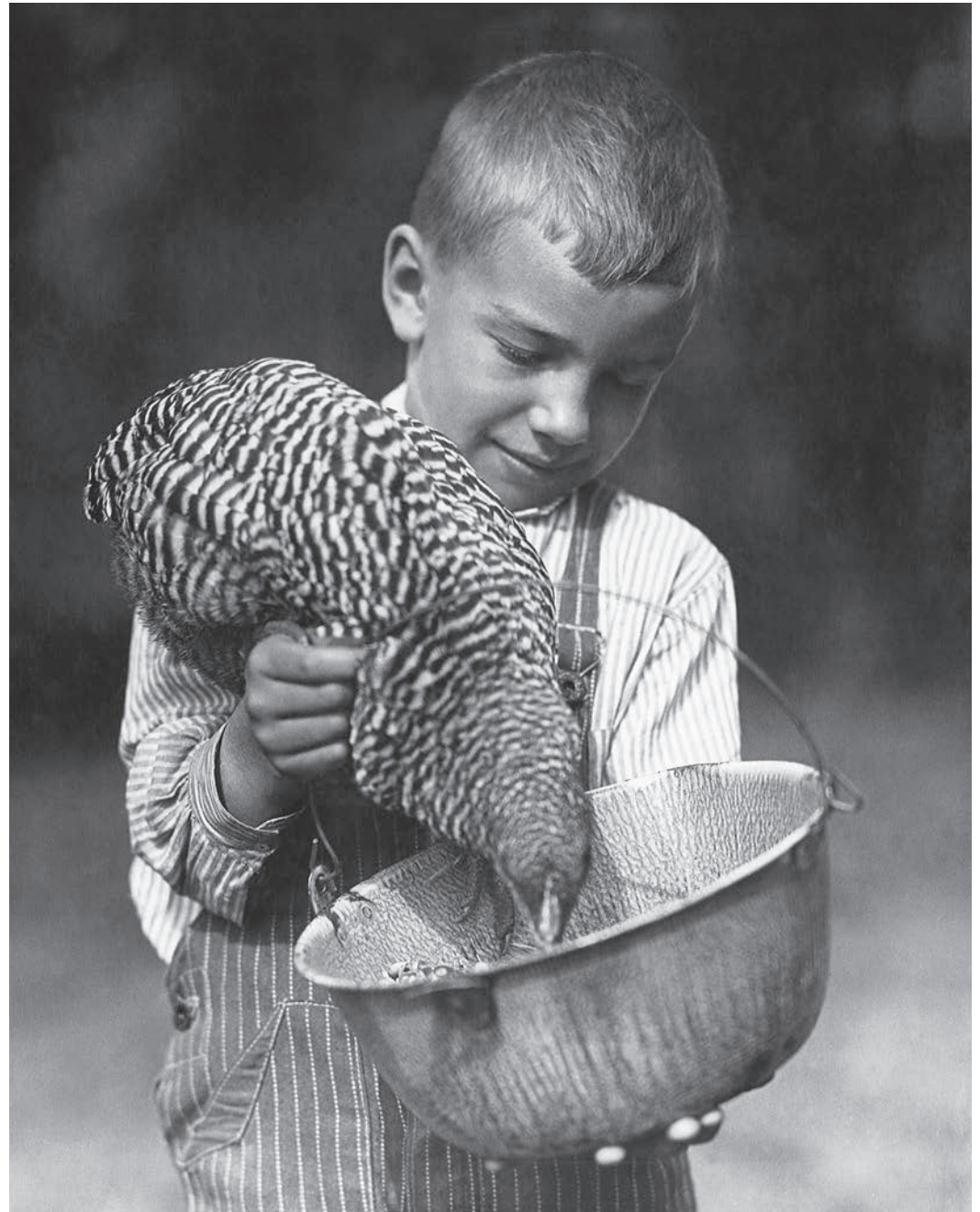




Allen had an eye for capturing crowds in action, such as this one gathered to view Hereford cattle on the Van Natta farm at Battle Ground in 1912. In order to capture this perspective, Allen would have ascended to a higher place, such as a grain bin. This vantage point shows that attendees were wearing their Sunday best. It also indicates that the automobile had supplanted the horse and buggy on many farms by this time. (Tippecanoe County)



Family history indicates that Mary Abbie Allen taught her husband basic photography skills. Here, John Allen shows his wife taking a photograph of ducklings swimming in a washtub while Chester stands nearby. This photo-within-a-photo documents many things: an intimate family moment, Abbie as a photographer, and the greater scope of the image captured by her. (N.p., ca. 1912)



Chester feeds a Barred Plymouth Rock hen at his grandmother's farm near Clay City. (Clay County, ca. 1914)



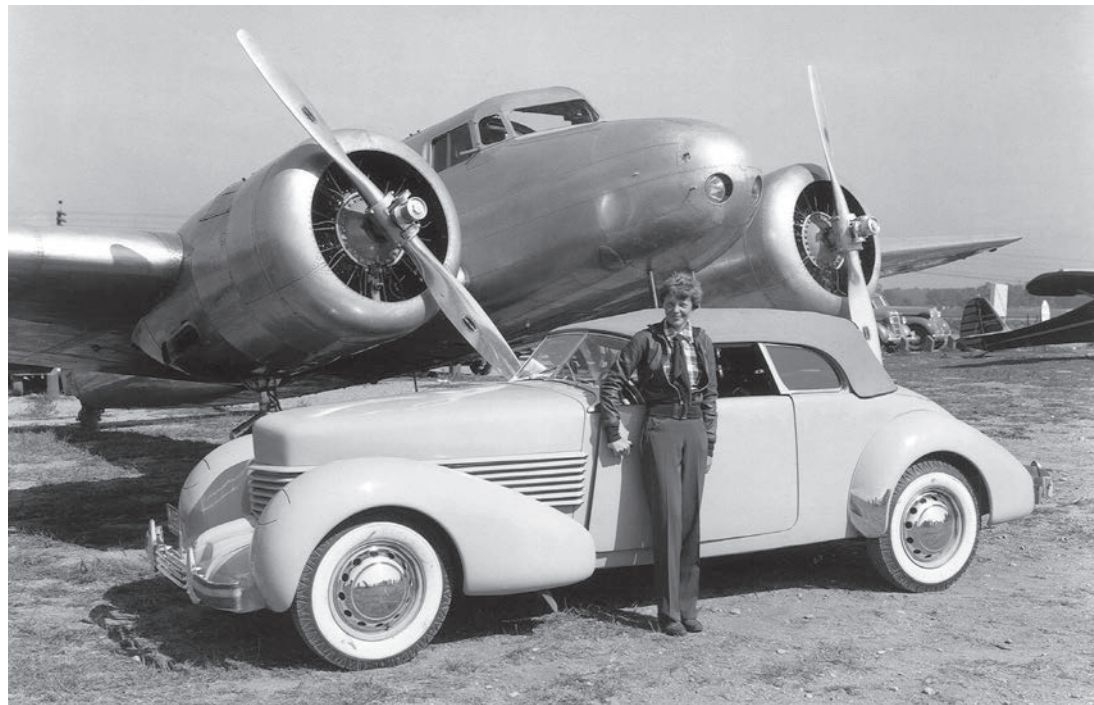
styles, home furnishings, and the items people thought important as they went about their daily lives. They also record the transformation of the rural landscape and life there. Growing infrastructure would replace muddy and rutted roads with gravel or concrete, making it easier for horses and buggies—and later, automobiles—to travel to and from communities across the state. And the expansion of electric power beyond the city and into the most remote townships of Indiana allowed families to listen to the latest news, sports, and entertainment on their radios, rendering rural isolation a thing of the past.

As part of his work for Purdue University, Allen was able to document and preserve farms and homes, peoples and animals, and machinery and nature for decades to come. Using a heavy wooden camera, he captured the Hoosier and American experience in thousands of images, first on glass-plate negatives and later on film. His earliest images were in black and white but eventually shifted to color by the late 1950s. Little to nothing was off-limits to photograph. His snapshots of rural life depict men, women, and children doing their chores, but they also capture families playing and praying together, celebrating weddings and the birth of children, and honoring deceased loved ones.

Allen recognized that his photographs were more than pretty pictures. He described and documented events and places in detail, storing negatives and prints in specialized sleeves with meticulously typewritten labels. Print



Allen photographed President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Indianapolis as he spoke into a microphone from his car in 1936. (Marion County)



Aviator Amelia Earhart stands in front of her new Cord automobile and Lockheed Electra airplane at the Purdue University airport. Allen would have had the opportunity to photograph Earhart during the time she spent on the Purdue campus in West Lafayette. (Tippecanoe County, 1936; courtesy John Allen Benham)







In this photo from the J. C. Allen Collection, Purdue President Edward C. Elliott (right) poses with John Wooden, who received the Big 10 Medal for scholarship and athletic achievement at his June 1932 graduation. Wooden would go on to become the legendary basketball coach for the University of California at Los Angeles. (Tippecanoe County)

photographs were often labeled with handwritten notes that included individual names, dates, and extra details thought pertinent. A historical photograph without accompanying information may grab one's attention, but that same photograph accompanied by the who, what, when, where, why, and how provides knowledge and evidence. The latter makes each photograph priceless.

There is no indication that Allen intended for his photographs to carry historic significance while he was taking them, but near the end of his life, he realized his collection had captured agricultural history and rural life like no one individual before or after had done.



The spring 1949 graduating class at Purdue University marches into the Executive Building—today known as the Frederick L. Hovde Hall of Administration—for its commencement exercises. (Tippecanoe County)



Due to the popularity of family photographs among magazine editors, Allen liked taking pictures of his own family members. Here, Chester Allen (left) works alongside his mother, Abbie Allen, in a garden. (N.p., ca. 1911)



# A Photographer's Record ❀



John Allen kept meticulous notes on his photographs. He recorded the usual information, such as the date, location, equipment, and name of the person pictured. But as this particular data sheet shows, he often documented additional information, which here included details about how the equipment had been used, the amount and type of fuel required to run it, and even how the owner/operator had paid for it. When taken as a whole, his photographs and detailed records provide a valuable historical account of rural life during the early to mid-twentieth century. (Tazewell County, IL; 1936)

## Photographer's Data Sheet

J. C. Allen and Son, West Lafayette, Indiana  
(NAME AND ADDRESS OF PHOTOGRAPHER)  
DATE TAKEN Oct. 19, 1936 MODEL RD 4  
EQUIPMENT Two row John Deere Corn picker  
(GIVE MAKE AND MODEL, CAPACITY, ETC.)  
LOCATION J. P. Werner farm, Tremont, Ill.  
(GIVE NAME AND LOCATION OF JOB)  
OWNER Schurter Bros. NAME OF OPERATOR Henry Schurter  
P. O. ADDRESS Box 21, Tremont, Illinois.  
DESCRIPTION OF WORK Picking corn  
  
  
NUMBER OF HOURS TRACTOR HAS OPERATED 1600 hours  
PRODUCTION (Rate of doing work) Picking 900 to 100 bu. a day  
FUEL Deisel Fuel Oil COST 7¢ GALLONS 10 gal for  
PER GAL. 7¢ PER HOUR 15 acres  
OWNER'S OR OPERATOR'S REMARKS \_\_\_\_\_ (Write on reverse side)

### DO NOT WRITE IN SPACE BELOW

PASSED BY B. O. P. R. \_\_\_\_\_ SUBMITTED \_\_\_\_\_ ACCEPTED \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE  
TESTIMONIAL? YES ☐ NO ☐  
RELEASED FOR: NEWS ☐ PUBLICITY ☐  
(SEE OTHER) LITERATURE ☐  
(SIDE FOR REASON) GENERAL ☐  
NUMBER ASSIGNED \_\_\_\_\_

The owner of this tractor is a Farm Power Contractor. He plows, discs, and does all kinds of farm work and also does some road work. He plowed about 1000 acres in 1936. Henry Schurter, who is only 20 years old said he had paid for the outfit in 6 months of custom work.



In 1928, Allen took this photograph of Lewis Gardner from Horse Creek, Kentucky, carrying grain to a local mill on the back of mule. (Hart County, KY)

His legacy is forever linked to the tens of thousands of images he amassed during his fifty years of traveling the back roads of Indiana and the Midwest. We, the authors of this work, present these selected images from the eyes, mind, and camera of John Calvin Allen. We hope our readers enjoy this journey to moments long since passed but readily reimagined into existence in all of our minds, hearts, and souls.







John Bullard works hard to get the day's mail. (Tippecanoe County, 1934)

# *The Early Life of John C. Allen*

In his youth, John Calvin Allen did not aspire to become a photographer, but the twists and turns of life led him there nevertheless. Influences included having a father who was physically unable to work, growing up in an orphanage, developing a genuine interest in livestock, drawing a meager salary as a Purdue University clerk and stenographer, and living through advances in printing technologies that allowed magazines and newspapers to reproduce photographs in print. Collectively, these events changed the personal and professional life of Allen from farmer to photographer.

Even though the American Civil War predated Allen's birth by decades, its effect on his father, James Thomas Allen (1844–97), would directly impact John's young life. Twenty years before John was born, his father was a working farmer and practicing harness maker. Like most of his friends, James joined the Union Army, enlisting in June 1862 with the Fifty-Fourth Indiana Infantry Regiment as a private for a three-month stint. By the end of September, eighteen-year-old James returned to farming in Indiana.

Most Northerners expected the southern Confederates to fall quickly to the well-armed Union army, but the war would continue until 1865. By 1864, the high number of casualties had taken a heavy toll on troop numbers for both armies, and each side needed new recruits to replace the tens of thousands of men who

had died or been wounded on the battlefield. The United States offered recruits an additional \$100 for one year's service in the Union army. Whether it was patriotism or the money or both, in October 1864 James once again became a soldier.

During this second tour of duty, James and the Thirty-Third Indiana Infantry Regiment were assigned to General William T. Sherman's army, where they would become accustomed to long marches and hard fighting.<sup>1</sup> As a low-ranking foot soldier, James marched to Nashville, Tennessee, where the Union army engaged and defeated the Confederate forces of General John Bell Hood at the Battle of Nashville in the second week of December 1864. As the year drew to an end, James recalled, "[W]e suffered great exposure in forced marches through swamps and sloughs wading until we went in camp at a little town in Alabama called Courtland about New Year's Day of 1865."<sup>2</sup> By the time they arrived, he had marched 130 miles.

During his days in Alabama, James became chronically ill. He was sent from the front lines to a hospital in Chattanooga on January 6, 1865, and soon thereafter to Cumberland Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. He was diagnosed with hepatitis, rheumatism, and chronic diarrhea. With the Civil War drawing to an end, he was honorably discharged in April 1865.<sup>3</sup>

Returning home, he found work as a clerk in a dry goods store. A railroad accident on December 27, 1877, resulted in his lower right leg being amputated below the knee. Poor in health and now disabled, James went back to making harnesses as well as barrels, buckets, and churns.<sup>4</sup> By 1878, thirty-four-year-old James was no longer physically able to work and earn a living to support his family.<sup>5</sup> In 1893, at age forty-nine, he was admitted to the U.S. National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers—today part of the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs—at Marion, Indiana. He would eventually die of heart failure in 1897 at age fifty-three while visiting his son in Clay City, Indiana.<sup>6</sup>



John Calvin Allen was born near Darwin, Illinois, on September 11, 1881. His father by this time had remarried and, with John's arrival, now had six children between his first and second marriages. In 1883, tragedy struck the Allen family when John's mother, Joan (1851–83), died at the age of 32. Years later, he would write, "My mother died when I was 18 months old. Father broke up housekeeping and we . . . children were never together again as a family."<sup>7</sup> John's paternal grandmother and an aunt and uncle, Albert and Jennie Lane, took him in to live on an eighty-acre farm roughly eight miles south of Sullivan, Indiana.<sup>8</sup>

The young boy adapted well to his adopted family. He said he loved his uncle like a father and explained:

I had not lived with my father since I could remember. . . . Those were mostly trouble-free, enjoyable days although we were much poorer than most anyone at the present time. I do not remember being very hungry. It seems we had plenty of cornbread and milk. I do remember getting a half-stick of candy in my shoe at Christmas time. If we went to town we drove two farm work-horses [hitched] to the big wagon over dirt roads, often very muddy and sometimes very dusty.<sup>9</sup>

He and the others slept in a one-room log cabin heated by a fireplace to keep them warm during cold winters. Adjacent to the living quarters was an adjoining kitchen, where meals were eaten on a long wooden table. When he was old enough to attend school, he went to a nearby one-room schoolhouse, where the teacher was Jennie Lane's brother, William A. Curtis.

Then the still-young John Allen experienced a life-changing event. He recounted, "During my last year on the farm . . . I was a happy boy on the farm, then 'the roof fell in.' I was almost six years old when my father, who had been a Northern soldier, came and took me to the Indiana Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphans' Home near Knightstown, Indiana."<sup>10</sup> Why his father took such a drastic measure may never be known.

The institution cared for orphaned, homeless, or impoverished children of Civil War Union soldiers. By the time John was admitted in 1888, the home had become the guardian of boys and girls whose parents were unable or unwilling to care for their children.<sup>11</sup>

John's father wrote on the May 1888 application, "Said applicant [J. C. Allen] is destitute of means of support and education, and the father of said applicant is a permanent cripple having lost his leg by accident since the war."<sup>12</sup> Just a few weeks later, the six-year-old boy was brought to the home, where he told his father good-bye and remained for the next ten years.

John Allen slowly adapted to life at Knightstown, writing, "At first this was a very bitter experience. I was but a small boy and very homesick among larger boys. Somehow I gradually got over it."<sup>13</sup> The boys were issued military uniforms and marched everywhere

they went. Allen noted, "At the Orphans' Home we were divided into groups of about 30 and each group marched most everywhere they went, to breakfast, dinner and supper, to school and to chapel. We wore blue uniforms with knee pants and brass buttons and we lined up two and two with the smaller boys in front and had to keep in step."<sup>14</sup>

The children attended classes, where Allen began learning the three Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic. He observed, "The first year in school I was at the top of the class. The teacher, Miss Laura Walkstetter, showed me the only affection that I can remember when I handed her my slate with what must have been the correct answer."<sup>15</sup> It seems what the young man needed most in his life were kind words and any signs of affection. He recalled, "One nice spring day it was my job to plow part of the home garden with two

fine horses and a breaking plow. I was proud of my job, the soil was turned over beautifully and I tried to see how smooth and even I could make it. I got my reward when the old Dutch gardener told my boss, '[I]t don't take the big boys to do a good job.'"<sup>16</sup>

Allen recounted another story about his stay from 1893:

When I was about 12 years old I had an experience that changed my life. A Mr. and Mrs. John Allen from Illinois visited the orphan's home and because of the same name came to see me. Mrs. Allen especially was a very fine



This image is one of the few surviving ferrotypes, also known as tintypes, that include John Allen's parents and older siblings prior to his birth in 1881. John wrote on the back that his mother, Joan, was seated in the center holding daughter Alma in her lap. Another daughter, Cora, stands to her right, while son James stands to her left. Directly behind Joan is Allen's father, also named James, who has a mustache and is wearing a white shirt with no jacket. (N.p., ca. 1874; courtesy John O. Allen)



person and as I remember it was she who gave me Mr. Allen's own personal Bible. Swearing was a common language among many of the boys, including myself; but gradually I broke the habit. I began going to Christian Endeavor [a non-denominational evangelical society] and took the pledge, a part of which is, "[T]o the best of my ability I will lead a Christian life."<sup>17</sup>

This promise in 1893 that he made to himself would be a trait that his own children and grandchildren would reiterate—swearing and drinking were never allowed in the Allen home.

The older children were tasked with learning a trade they could use when they left the orphanage. Allen recounted his experience with this:

At the age of 13 each boy or girl was required to learn some kind of a trade by going to school half-day and working half-day. I was either selected or chose (on my own) to work on the dairy farm where in the afternoons I helped feed the dairy herd and I milked two of the cows morning and evening. To stick one's head into the flank of a good dairy cow on a cold winter day, with a bucket between your knees and milking with both hands helps to develop the wrists and is an excellent experience for a growing boy.<sup>18</sup>

It wasn't all work at the school. Allen enjoyed recreational activities at the Knightstown school, too, saying:

There were fun and recreation periods at the home. A reservoir or lake nearby often froze over in winter and we had excellent skating. I was a good skater and enjoyed playing cross-tag and shiny [ice hockey].

A very beautiful clear creek with rock bottom, not too far away was where we went swimming when we could. The better swimmers often went to Blue River almost two miles away. It was a beautiful stream in those early days. Both places were "out of bounds" but we somehow managed to get to them. I was not too good at baseball, but at marbles I was one of the best. We played for keeps and I usually had a pocket full of "chalkies" [unglazed clay marbles] to prove it.<sup>19</sup>

Allen enjoyed some time away from the school visiting family members in the summer, recalling, "One pleasant redeeming feature during those ten years was that each summer I spent a two-month vacation either with my sister in Terre Haute or with my uncle and aunt who had moved to a small farm near Shelburn, Indiana."<sup>20</sup> Based on where he took his vacations, it does seem that father and son had permanently severed their bond. The young boy enjoyed spending time with his uncle's black rat terrier dog, noting that they were "very close friends." He also described a ride he took on the Pennsylvania Railroad, saying that "late June showed the woods full of wild roses in bloom."<sup>21</sup>

Allen did well in school and was a diligent worker on the farm. During his last year at the home, he was able to take a course in business, where he learned typing and shorthand, and became a proficient stenographer. Nearly sixteen years old now, he received his high school diploma in 1897. He shook hands with teachers and told his friends good-bye. As an adult, he would write, "I was in the Orphans' Home for ten years and although I didn't realize it at the time, this was without a doubt a very good preparation for later life. I learned at a very early age to depend upon my own efforts."<sup>22</sup>



A rare photograph believed to be John C. Allen as a young man of sixteen years old in 1897. That year, he left the Indiana Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphans' Home near Knightstown, Indiana, to start life on his own. (Sullivan County; courtesy John Allen Benham)

He would return in 1929 to take photographs of the dairy herd at the orphanage.

As the teenager left school with a set of new clothes and fifteen dollars in his pocket, he must have wondered what he would do with the rest of his life.<sup>23</sup> He first went to live on his uncle's farm. After the crops were harvested that fall, he took a job on a crew that built railroads. For his effort, he earned \$1.35 a day. He started as a nipper [who worked with the rails as they were being assembled on the track] and water boy, and recounted, "[B]efore I finished I was driving the spikes that hold the rails to the new wooden ties—a man's job."<sup>24</sup>



With cold weather halting construction, he went to work in a coal mine, using mules to haul carts through the mine to an area where the coal would be brought to the surface. He recalled, “After one trip, I remember going back and finding a pile of rock on the track big enough to have buried me. I don’t remember being afraid. We just cleaned up the rock and went on hauling coal as usual. The man who had the mine leased failed to make a success of it and I lost my last week’s wages.”<sup>25</sup>

Allen spent much of 1898 working near his uncle’s property for a farmer who provided him room and board and thirteen dollars per month in wages.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, his older brother, James Russell Allen, who at the time was practicing dentistry in Clay City, told his younger sibling that he had a spare room in his home and the possibility of a job. John Allen wrote about that opportunity, which was with the Evansville and Indianapolis Railroad, saying:

[I would be] sweeping the floors, handling the freight, carrying the mail to the post office, delivering telegrams, etc. I would be given the opportunity to learn the telegraph and learn other business connected with running the railroad office. There were no trucks in those days and everything that came to Clay City and the surrounding country came in over the railroad. The railroad office was a busy place.<sup>27</sup>

Eventually, he also served as a relief telegraph operator and agent at multiple locations on the line.

By age 20, Allen sought out and took a job as relief telegraph operator with the Baltimore and Ohio Southwestern Railroad in Washington, Indiana.



(Above) John Allen and Mary Abbie Peavey Allen around the time of their marriage in 1904. (N.p.; courtesy John Allen Benham)

(Right) Mary Abbie Peavey stood for this photograph during her youth. The posed nature of the photograph was common during the late nineteenth century. (N.p., n.d.; courtesy John Allen Benham)



Eventually, he served as a telegraph operator in Oakdale and Rivervale, Indiana, where he assumed additional duties as ticket agent, express manager, and Western Union manager.

Allen distinguished himself at the Baltimore and Ohio Southwestern and by 1902 was made a train dispatcher, which he called “the best telegraph job on the railroad.”<sup>28</sup> He described himself as “probably the youngest dispatcher in the USA” and noted, “There probably is nothing better than a job bigger than you are to help to make a young man develop. You either make good or else, and I wasn’t looking for the ‘else.’”<sup>29</sup>

Allen’s good fortune continued when Mary Abbie Peavey (1881–1980), who was called Abbie, agreed to marry him in 1904.<sup>30</sup> As the then twenty-three-year-old Allen recalled, he had married “the best girl in Clay City, Indiana, and we spent our honeymoon at the St. Louis World’s Fair, much of the time with my bride and her cousin, a red head. I do not recommend this kind of honeymoon.”<sup>31</sup>

At least one account indicates that Allen’s lifelong passion with photography had its origins in his visit to the fair.<sup>32</sup> He had purchased for his wife a four-by-five Eastman Kodak camera, which was not common at the time.<sup>33</sup> After learning how to use it, she would teach him how to use it and print his own photographs.<sup>34</sup> By experimenting with the camera and subjects, “he gradually improved his technique and became an expert at the art,” taking photographs that captured the attention



of those who saw them.<sup>35</sup> Little did he know that this hobby would soon turn into a successful business.

The Allens lived for a short time in Washington, Indiana, where John managed the 3 to 11 P.M. shift as the telegraph operator. He recalled that “things went smoothly for some time. I had a very good salary for those days and passes on the railroad that we often used.”<sup>36</sup> But following the arrival of his son, Chester, in 1907, John wrote, “[I]t did not take me many years to decide that I didn’t want to work nights all my life seven days a week, and when my father-in-law offered me an opportunity to join with my brother-in-law and operate a 600-acre farm in Eel River bottoms, I decided to try it.”<sup>37</sup>

This farm—which included chickens, pigs, horses, cattle, wheat, hayfields, orchards, and watermelons—would have been one of the larger farms in the state at the time.<sup>38</sup> Chester later wrote that he was surprised about this change, saying, “I don’t know how they did it but Mother’s family talked Dad into leaving his railroad job and taking over the family farm which my Grandmother’s parents had left to her.”<sup>39</sup> But Chester also noted that “Dad loved agriculture and entered the farming project with big hopes.”<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately for the Allens, poor drainage meant sections of their farm were often underwater when the nearby river flooded, making John’s reentry into farming more or less short-lived. He observed, “The farm was not well tiled, we had a wet season, and as one might guess, the farming arrangement did not work out well.”<sup>41</sup> With no levees or dams to manage the water, fields often flooded.

When a third year of flooding struck the farm and money was hard to come by, John became discouraged and worried about taking care of Chester: “I gave the

farm trial credit for getting me out of the train dispatcher’s job. It took something rather unusual to cause me to give up a good interesting and exciting job with a good salary. As a lifetime occupation, it did not have the possibilities that I [had] later on in the photo-illustrating business.”<sup>42</sup>

Allen returned to the railroads, working first for a railroad in Hymera, Indiana, and later in the freight office on the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad at Hoopeston, Illinois.<sup>43</sup> It seemed that he was destined to be a railroad man for the rest of his life.

Two years passed quickly. While he enjoyed the work and the pay that went with it, he hated working evenings. He wrote, “After a few years of railroad work I decided I didn’t want to sit up nights and dispatch

trains all my life, so I went to Purdue University as a clerk and secretary in the agricultural experiment station” in 1909.<sup>44</sup> At twenty-eight years old, Allen missed the outdoors and being on a farm, so he accepted the work in the Animal Husbandry Department at Purdue, saying, “I thought this might give me a chance to learn what others knew about agriculture and farm livestock.”<sup>45</sup> Unbeknownst to him, the twists and turns of life were still pushing him toward photography.



John C. Allen taking pictures on horseback (N.p., n.d.; courtesy John O. Allen)



John Hamilton uses a grindstone to sharpen an axe in 1931. At the time of the photograph, he was one of the oldest residents in Bobo, Indiana. (Adams County)



# The Photographer Emerges

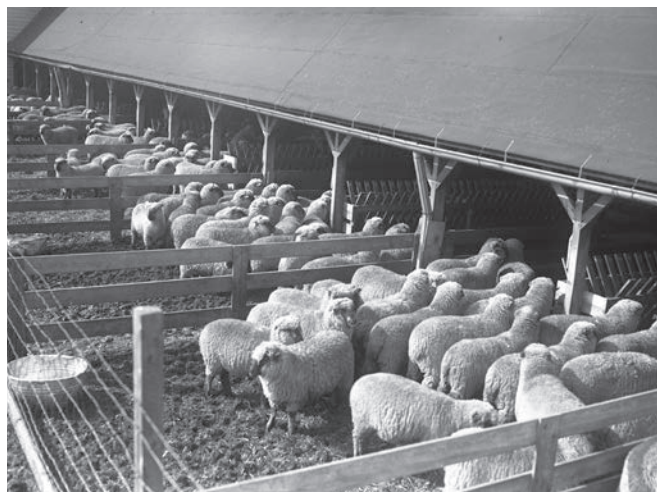
After working on the farm and for the railroads, John Allen made a pragmatic choice in 1909 to take the position as a clerk and stenographer in the Agricultural Experiment Station at Purdue University on the West Lafayette campus.<sup>1</sup> In addition to his office work, Allen helped select uniform animals for nutritional studies, but he soon became responsible for weighing the livestock at specific intervals and tracking the data.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, Purdue agricultural programs were divided into three distinct and equal units: the Agricultural Experiment Station, which conducted agricultural research; the Extension Service, which oversaw outreach efforts between the university and the people and communities in Indiana; and the School of Agriculture, which was responsible for academic programs for students. Allen was hired into the first unit under the supervision of John H. Skinner, dean of the School of Agriculture and chief of the Department of Animal Husbandry. Skinner had developed a national reputation for his research on feeding balanced diets to cattle, hogs, and sheep in order to ensure maximum and profitable gain.

To Allen's credit, Skinner quickly learned that his new hire could be trusted when it came to collecting, analyzing, and summarizing large amounts of livestock research data.<sup>3</sup> Skinner told



John Allen tries to find the best angle for photographing a hog. (Newton County, 1918; College of Agriculture Extension Reports Collection, Newton County)



Allen became well known as a photographer when he began documenting the results of Purdue livestock feeding studies, such as this one conducted in 1917. His photos were published in agricultural magazines and newspapers along with articles about the research. (Tippecanoe County)

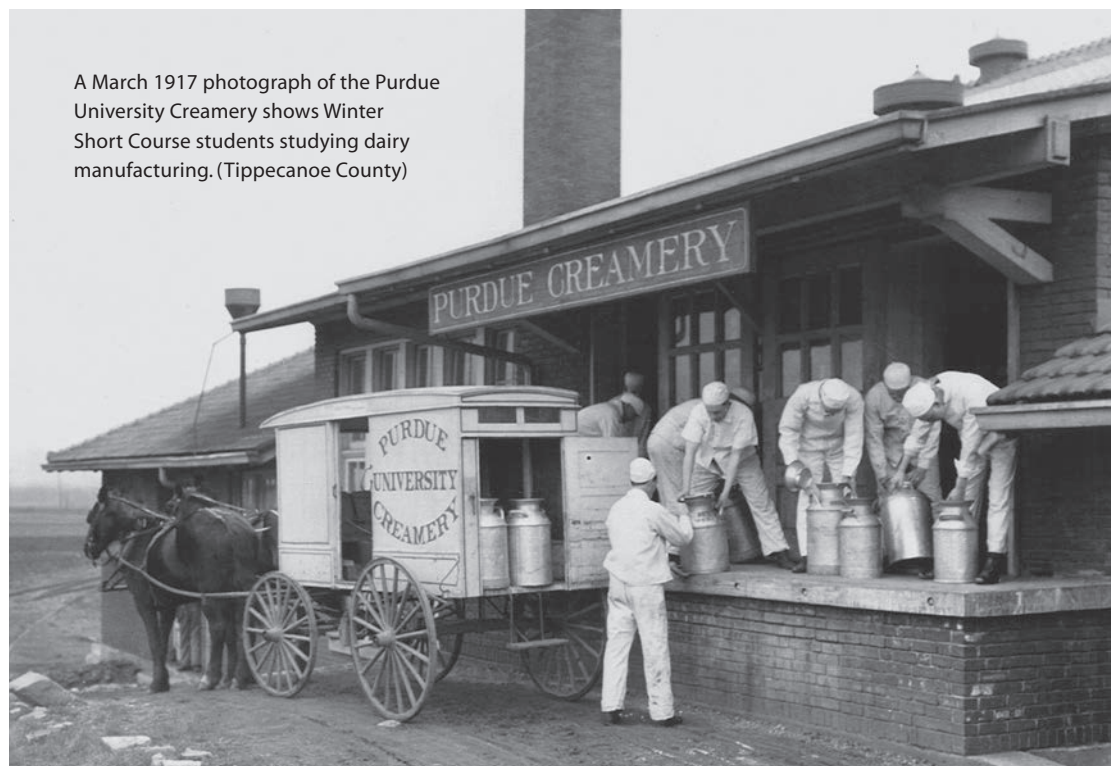
another livestock researcher, “Mr. Allen is a first-class calculator”—a high compliment on Allen's research and data-analysis acumen.<sup>4</sup>

While Allen had gained plenty of practical working experience with livestock at the orphanage and on his family's farm, he lacked an in-depth understanding of agriculture.<sup>5</sup> Allen's own admission was that he needed to take college classes to increase his fundamental knowledge of livestock.<sup>6</sup>

Allen applied for and was accepted as a special student in the School of Agriculture from September 1911 to June 1912.<sup>7</sup> The thirty-year-old worked his full-time job while taking six college-level classes, including Livestock Judging, Livestock Management, Poultry Housing and Breeding, Advance Livestock Judging, and Animal Nutrition and Principles of Feeding. Allen's official transcripts from Purdue indicated he earned three As, one B, and two Cs in his coursework.



During this time, Allen's interest in photography conjoined with his newfound career and education. Fortunately for him, he had access to a Press Graflex camera that had been purchased for the agricultural programs. This camera provided the opportunity for him to hone his photography skills.<sup>8</sup>



A March 1917 photograph of the Purdue University Creamery shows Winter Short Course students studying dairy manufacturing. (Tippecanoe County)



(Top right and bottom) John Allen would do just about anything to get the best angle for the shot he had in mind. (N.p., ca. 1940; courtesy John O. Allen)

He began to explore visually documenting the livestock in experiments as a novel way to complement the numerical data. His photographs immediately and irrefutably demonstrated research outcomes, causing Skinner and other station researchers to take note. Allen began exploring different methods for taking the photographs, changing the distance and angles to ascertain the best approach for documenting research results. As a result, he began developing an eye for what constituted a good photograph.

Allen used the Graflex to capture differences between well-bred and inferior specimens of hogs, horses, sheep, and dairy and beef cattle, with the resulting photographs used for instructing students. Within a few years, he expanded his subjects to include corn, soybeans, strawberries, tomatoes, apples,

peaches, and just about anything found in farm fields, barns, and homes. Allen's photographs began appearing within Agricultural Experiment Station and Extension publications. Researchers saw the value of sending photographs with their articles to newspapers and trade publications, and soon his images began to appear in periodicals such as *Hoard's Dairyman*, *Prairie Farmer*, and *Breeder's Gazette*. The photographs published in state and national publications raised the visibility of Purdue's agricultural programs. As Allen's grandson recounted, "Purdue liked the attention that the pictures that were being published in several agricultural magazines brought to Purdue."<sup>9</sup>

Allen himself also received a fair share of positive press from these published photographs. As his renown expanded beyond Indiana's borders, Allen's



images caught the attention of Ohio State University administrators. In 1915 Ohio State offered Allen a twofold opportunity: a contract to photograph 10,000 images of rural life in Ohio and an offer to become a full-time photographer for the university. For Allen, this must have been a dream come true. By this time, Allen knew he had both the talent and interest to make photography a successful and profitable career.

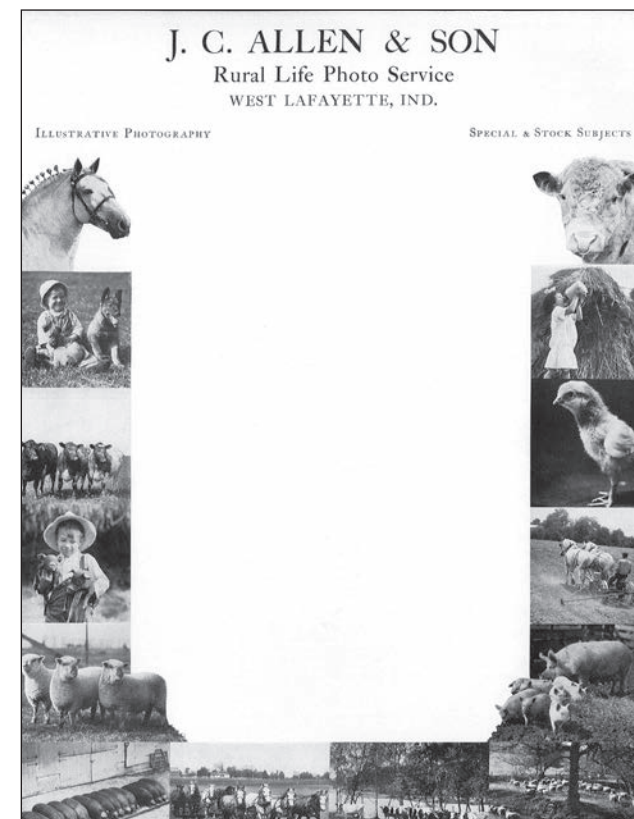
Allen told Purdue administrators about the offer, and Purdue quickly matched the Ohio State proposal, offering Allen a full-time position as the official photographer for the Agricultural Experiment Station and Extension Service.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Allen negotiated to work half-time at Purdue so he could concurrently start his own photography business. Purdue agreed to Allen's terms, with Skinner writing in a May 1915 letter to his boss in the Agricultural Experiment Station that "Mr. J. C. Allen be employed on the basis of one-half time, with the understanding that he is to devote the other half to his own private business, his services to the university to distributed as follows; Salary to be paid Mr. Allen to be \$900.00 per year and to be understood that his personal business is not to interfere with his experiment station duties."<sup>11</sup> The agreement with Purdue also stated that all photography equipment had to be purchased by Allen's business.

Later in life, when asked about why he became a farm photographer, Allen said, "Probably by necessity and accident. Then with a wife and two children (as with many young people today) the wages were barely enough to meet expenses. So, I had to find some way to supplement my income and I turned to photography. I soon found there was a place for good photographs."<sup>12</sup>

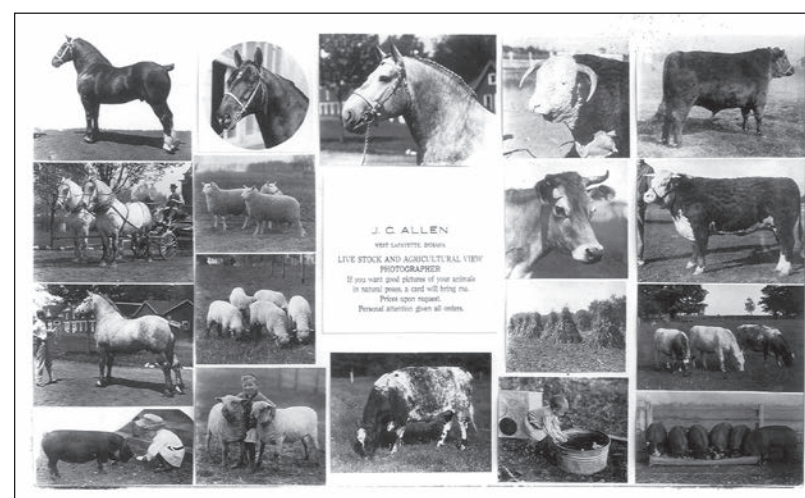


This photograph of the Agricultural Experiment Station on the Purdue campus in West Lafayette was taken in June 1926. Allen's office was on the ground floor. (Tippecanoe County)

Indeed, in 1912 the Allen family had welcomed a daughter, Martha Charlene Allen. With a growing family to support, why would Allen decide to forgo a full-time position, cutting a regular paycheck in half if the family had been experiencing financial difficulties? As early as 1910, Allen had perceived an opportunity to generate a second income by selling high-quality photographs to the agricultural press, and by 1915, he had developed a savvy mind for business. Simply put, he believed he could earn much more by selling photographs through his business than by working full-time for Purdue.



Letterhead (above) and business card (below) used by John Allen (N.d.; courtesy John O. Allen)







Here, Allen's son, Chester (left), and daughter, Martha, fish on the Wildcat Creek in 1918. John Allen frequently photographed his children as models for his commercial work. (Tippecanoe County)

Allen specifically pointed to advice he had received from a well-respected agricultural editor.

From Art Page, former editor of *Orange Judd Farmer* and from the *Breeder's Gazette*, I discovered that there was some market for good farm pictures, so I decided to try to fill some of that demand. This gradually developed into a photo-illustrating business. Without attempting to do so I had by accident prepared myself during the past years for just such a business. First, my boyhood experiences on the farm gave me some practical knowledge of the farm, the course in livestock judging at Purdue Univ[ersity], was particularly valuable for making good livestock photos and my former business training on the railroad helped to fit me for success in this kind of enterprise. It still required determination and plenty of hard work.<sup>13</sup>

## A Photograph and a Poem

It is often said that a photograph is worth a thousand words, but in the case of one of Allen's, it was worth a poem. In 1934, Dean John Skinner of the Purdue University School of Agriculture received the following letter from John Ashton, managing editor of the *Texas Grower and Valley Farmer* headquartered in Corpus Christi, Texas.

I write you now mainly on account of an Indiana boy whose name I do not know. He is probably a man by now—or pretty near it, and his picture is on the front cover of our magazine, copies of which are going to you under separate cover. Mr. Allen, your photographer, sold me this picture along with others, about 1928 or 1929. Please give Mr. Allen one of the copies I am sending you, and ask him to identify this boy. It is such a striking picture that, after I had decided to use it, I went home one evening with the image of that Indiana boy in my mind and wrote the little poem about him, on page 9, of the February number of *The Texas Grower and Valley Farmer*, symbolizing him as typical of the American farm boy. Already people are writing me quite enthusiastically about the poem, and the biggest daily newspaper in Texas—*The Dallas News*—published the poem in its issue of Sunday, Feb. 18, 1934. . . . I wish Mr. Allen would bring this matter to the attention of the parents of the boy in question. . . . I wish to say, also, that Mr. Allen's skill as a photographer of rural subjects is outstanding and "The Farmer Boy" is one of his very best compositions.<sup>14</sup>

This poem, which Ashton had written after being inspired by Allen's photograph, became popular in agricultural circles.

### The Farmer Boy

He's just a country urchin, as happy as can be;  
A child of Mother Nature,—'tis plain enough to see.  
He's roamed the fields for miles around, he's romped on ev'ry hill,  
And woods and streams have had to yield their secrets to his will.

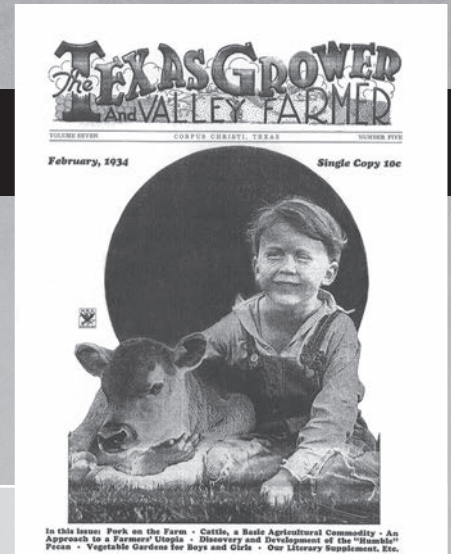
He knows the haunts of 'coon and fox, he's watched the eagle soar;  
He's trailed the bobcat to its lair, and heard the cougar roar.  
He's climbed the tallest poplar tree, and many a bee's nest found.  
And once, when seeking arrow-heads, he struck an Indian mound.

The names of all the trees he knows, and many weeds can name;  
And ev'ry season brings its joys to one who knows his game.  
He's trained as pets both birds and beasts, for kindness ever pays;  
In fact, like Daniel Boone of old, he loves God's creatures' ways.

His freckled face and tousled hair, his smile that won't come off;  
His ragged jeans and shoeless feet proclaim a lad who's "tough."  
"O, would I were a boy like him!" in fancy comes a wail  
From pampered weakling, richly clad, whose health's begun to fail.

He's just a lusty farmer boy, contented as can be;  
Nor would he change his humble home for palace, no, not he!  
No city wiles his mind beguile; he's made of sterner stuff:  
He's reared in Nature's own front yard—a diamond in the rough!<sup>15</sup>

Skinner replied to Ashton, stating, "I have your letter and copy of your magazine and poem on the farm boy. I will be glad to refer this to Mr. John Allen, and I think he can identify the lad for you and for the boy's parents. I am delighted with the poem. It has a lot of fine sentiment in it."<sup>16</sup>





Allen described one of his first photographs, saying:

[It was of] a small lamb taken with a borrowed 5 x 7 Press Graflex. This was back in the days when drawings were the chief means of illustrating farm publications. I sold the picture to a leading agricultural publication for the great sum of fifty cents, and, while the fifty cents was never received, my imagination was fired with the possibilities of agricultural illustrations for the farm press.”<sup>17</sup>

Allen worked long hours to get his photography business off the ground, knowing that he had to have the photographs and a market for them in order to make money.<sup>18</sup> He described going out into the countryside during his first years to take photographs of images he thought others would purchase: “All of my off days were spent making photographs with this borrowed [Graflex] camera on farms that lay within walking distance of town, and on occasions I would splurge enough to rent a horse and buggy and make short photographic trips into the country.”<sup>19</sup> In time, that gamble would pay off.

Allen credited *Hoard's Dairyman* as among the first to compensate him for one of his photographs, which showed the head of a dairy calf. Allen noted, “In actual cash, I received 50 cents for the picture, but it was worth dollars to me to see this first picture in print.”<sup>20</sup>

An earlier photograph was described in a *Purdue Alumnus* article: “It all began in 1910, when John Allen, then employed by the Purdue Animal Husbandry department, borrowed a camera from the Purdue Extension Service and took a picture of his Buster Brown-Clad son, Chester, ’29, with a lap full of Purdue prize piglets. A national farm magazine paid the munificent sum of \$1.50 for the publication rights.”<sup>21</sup>



An early photograph sold by John Allen captured this boy with his goat harnessed to a sled. (N.p., ca. 1925)



Chester (left) and Martha Allen hull hickory nuts. (N.p., 1913)

Another photograph taken early in Allen's career of a child holding a small goat was sold to *Country Gentleman*.

One of Allen's trademarks throughout his professional career was taking pictures of children—including his own children and grandchildren—interacting with young animals. He strongly believed that a picture needed to quickly capture the viewer's attention, and children always worked to make the viewer take a second look. Reflecting back on his career in 1976, Allen said he was “most proud of his work with children, where animals and children could be brought together.”<sup>22</sup>

Ralph Reeder, who worked in agricultural communications at Purdue, noted that soon after Allen's photographs began appearing in popular magazines such as the *Breeder's Gazette* and *Prairie Farmer*, “his photographs were showing up regularly in other national farm magazines.”<sup>23</sup> Allen was now a businessman in possession of his own company, which he named J. C. Allen Rural Life Photo Service.<sup>24</sup> His work through that business and for Purdue would eventually earn him a reputation for being one of the country's best rural life photographers.







Steve Hurley plays marbles near Lafayette. (Tippecanoe County, 1932)